

# Shelby County Inmate Training Emphasizes Local Labor Market

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**F**ormer Chief Justice Warren Burger often spoke of turning prisons into factories where inmates learned job skills while paying their debt to society. His vision is becoming a reality in a number of jurisdictions across the nation, including the Shelby County Government Division of Corrections in Memphis, Tennessee.

The division prides itself on not "warehousing" inmates, but rather occupying inmates' time with activities which teach skills that assist in long-term rehabilitation. Each year, with an increasing inmate population and dwindling monetary resources, the division's challenge is to use available resources, including taxpayer dollars, responsibly. At the

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same time, it is committed to provide the most benefit to the inmate by

teaching skills that will enable him or her to obtain gainful employment upon release and lead a positive and productive life.

Memphis is situated in the center of a large farming area encompassing three states. Because of the rural background of inmates sentenced by Shelby County courts, the county in 1929 established a working penal farm for misdemeanants. Inmates experimented with soil conservation and raised produce and livestock to provide affordable breeding stock to county farmers, learning skills that helped them pursue productive lives in the farming community.

## Changes in Offenders and Their Needs

The farming industry declined during the 1960s and early '70s, with the result that the jail inmates were more often from an urban than a rural or agricultural background. Corrections officials began seeing a different type of inmate—one who might have substance abuse problems, a violent record, or sub-standard reading and writing skills.

Compounding this change was a tremen-

dous increase in the number of inmates. Between 1985 and 1988,

the inmate population swelled from 500 misdemeanants to approximately 3,500 misdemeanants and felons. In addition, a federally imposed capacity limitation on Tennessee's state prisons required the division to begin housing convicted state inmates, some of whom might serve their entire sentences in the county.

With these shifts in the number and types of inmates, the division made several modifications. These included creating a more corrections-intensive management team and expanding the inmate services staff to develop more programs designed to help inmates gain marketable skills for today's complex workforce. Nearly 50 percent of the inmate population is involved in some type of work, training/vocational, or education program.

The education program includes courses provided on-site by a local community college, such as Adult Basic Education, GED, and word processing. Almost one-third of inmates participate in training/vocational programs, which include the Culinary Arts Program, the Landscape/Horticulture Program, and the Upholstery Program. Each program is designed to respond to the local labor market.

### **Culinary Arts Program**

Since its first class in May 1991, the grant-funded Culinary Arts Program has graduated eighty-two men and women inmates. The program has been well-received by the inmates, the public, and the local media. Culinary arts classes, conducted by the owner of a local culinary academy, are six weeks long, with classes meeting eight hours a day, five days a week.

Inmates are carefully screened for participation in the class, which is more like an apprenticeship in a fine restaurant than a skills training class. After completing the daily classroom lecture portion of the class, the inmates move to a specially designed teaching kitchen to prepare dishes from French and Southwestern cuisines. Participants also learn about other aspects of the restaurant industry, including setting tables and planning menus.

Because of the focus on post-release employment placement, inmates participating in the culinary arts program must be within thirteen weeks of their anticipated release date when they graduate. A local mental health center is under contract to assist division officials with placement of graduates.

### **Landscape/Horticulture Program**

With its mild climate (an average temperature of 62 degrees), Memphis offers many employment opportunities in the field of landscaping, which is a year-round industry in the city. The Division of

Correction's Landscape/Horticulture Program, funded through federal and state grants, began in 1991. So far, fifty inmates have participated in classroom lectures on topics such as landscape design and theory. With the acquisition of additional grant funds, the inmates will now be able to apply the classroom theory to actual hands-on training experience.

Beginning in the summer of 1992, landscape/horticulture students will work in an on-site greenhouse to raise flowers and bedding plants for county landscaping projects. With these projects, the inmates will apply their new skills in landscape design. In addition, the division will train inmates in plant and flower maintenance, lawn care, and erosion prevention. This training should give inmates an opportunity for employment in parks, golf courses, lawn services, and road and highway departments in the vicinity.

### **Upholstery Program**

The Upholstery Program has proven beneficial both to the inmate and the county.

Through this program, inmates learn manufacturing skills while the county saves

money. Inmates produce items such as mattresses, which were previously bought from outside vendors at a higher price. This program will result in a substantial savings, division officials predict, because the division alone uses 5,000 mattresses

each year. Since last fall, the upholstery shop has produced about 2,000 new mattresses. Participants also repair mattresses that can then be returned to use. The Upholstery Program is exploring the possibility of producing sheets, pillowcases, uniforms, and athletic shorts for inmates, creating additional savings.

### **Benefits to State Inmates**

Division administrators feel that the chance to promote long-term rehabilitation has, in a sense, also been helped by the state prison system's capacity limit. As a result of the population cap, several hundred local men who have been sentenced to state institutions are housed at the division until space becomes available in a state institution, which could be hundreds of miles away. Some of these inmates may serve their entire sentence locally.

Being housed closer to home makes possible more frequent visits with family and friends, who play major roles in the inmate's rehabilitation.

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Frequent visitation can strengthen or re-establish family ties that might have become strained due to incarceration or other circumstances. Local housing of state prisoners also provides these inmates with an opportunity to maintain ties to the

workplace and labor market, which will facilitate the post-release job search.

### **Cooperative Agreements Sought for New Program Development**

To meet the needs of the ever-growing inmate population and the community's expectation of inmates' successful reintegration into the community, division administrators know that additional skills training programs need to be developed. However, traditional funding sources, such as grant money and taxpayer-based budgets, are dwindling under competing demands.

Realizing these limitations, division officials are now taking aggressive action to forge cooperative agreements with private enterprise. The intention is to obtain additional capital to start correctional center-based industries, which can train inmates while helping to defray the cost of housing.

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